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**THE LAST LAP**  
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"There's Tug Ferguson," remarked Billy Mitchy, boxer and "ham actor," to his friend and satellite, the stub reporter, as a tall young fellow crawled into the Idle Hour pool room where they were playing a game of pea pool.

As if he heard the words, the man in question turned around. He was rather good looking, and there was a certain air of defiance in his lean face, and in the set of his narrow shoulders.

A strange expression flashed across his face as he saw Mitchy. There was a flicker of triumph in his eye as he nodded, almost insolently.

"D—n him!" exploded that gentleman, returning the bow sullenly. "He stole my girl once! I'll bet he pulled that Kiernan job the bulls have been so bumfoozled over," he finished vindictively after a pause looking slyly at the cub.

That boy's chubby visage was all interest. His air of perpetual surprised enthusiasm deepened.

"Do you think so?" he gasped, his eyes like saucers, "Is that the guy they suspect? Gee? That'd make some story, wouldn't it? Can't they get anything on him?"

"Pshaw!" snorted Mitchy, the scorn of the man-of-the-world for the young and unsophisticated in his voice; "Don't you know nothing? Don't you know he's too slick for 'em? They'd give their eye teeth to git somethin' on 'im. Now if it was me," he went on presently, warming to his subject, "I'll bet I'd catch 'im if I was a bull, but I ain't, so—"

"Oh, you do do you?" inquired a new voice behind him. Mitchy whirled to find the Captain of Detectives regarding him out of amusedly skeptical eyes. He was startled. He had thought himself to safe ground where he could blow to impress his young admiral. This was more than he had bargained for, but there was something in that smiling face that made it impossible for him to back down. He smiled back.

"Course I could," he said with an assurance he was far from feeling, now that he was, so to speak, up against it. To his mingled horror and satisfaction, the captain actually took him up.

"All right," that worthy grinned. "We'll give you a chance Mitchy. We'll temporarily put you on the force and try out your boast." There was a gleam of good natured malice in the captain's eye that fired his pride. Outside of that, too, he was only too glad to take a crack at Tug. Ever since that gentleman had married red haired Evelyn O'Hara from right under his nose there had been a smouldering enmity between them. Now he looked up to find Tug regarding him with an expression of faint derision. A flash of involuntary hatred passed like an electric current through his brain. It was not alone the captain whom he would "show" when the time came.

"Done!" he said savagely. "This'll be gettin' even on him for several things he's pulled on me!" The last was an inaudible mutter.

"All right boy," said the captain good naturedly. "Come on an' we'll cook this thing up. I'm curious to know how you're agoin' to hang anything onto 'im."

"I'll just watch 'im! That's all!" were the last words the still smiling Tug heard as the three of them went out of the door. After they had gone, however, his face sobered, and a crafty look overspread it. "So you think you'll queer me, do you?" he muttered. "You yellow dog! Well, we'll see." He loitered a few minutes to let them get out of sight, then went out.

The shakily stairs of his "apartment" out on Quimby street creaked as he strode up them, bringing a pretty, red haired girl with a strained look in her soft brown eyes, to the dingy door. A flame of home brightened her face as she opened to him, to die again at his half-shamed slump into the nearest chair. The question she asked was barely a breath, but it was asked with an intensity that betrayed its extreme importance.

"Its no use, Evelyn," he told her dully. "There ain't a job to be begged, bought or stolen. I'm agoin' back to—"

"Tug!" she implored, "Not that, not that! You promised when I—"

"No use, girlie," he interrupted bitterly. "I promised to take care 'o you too, an' I ain't agoin' to see you starve. What's the use 'o keepin' alive anyhow? You an' I've got ta live honest. You're so hungry now that you ain't hardly able to now I got you?" His face was fierce with the instinct to protect, to cherish.

"Just one more day, Tug," she pleaded bravely. She was hungry. Only she knew how hungry, but she pulled herself resolutely together, her own face glowing with a fire that made her very lovely. "Just one more day, maybe something will come up so you won't have to—"

"I ain't agoin' ta fool around no longer, girlie!" he told her, "I'm agoin' ta start out. I gotta feed you."

"Tug!" she gasped. "Agoin, her voice a wall of despair. "Oh Tug, no! They'll get you."

A swift thought of Mitchy and his boast crossed his mind, but he dis-

missed it with a shrug.

"No chance, girlie," he assured her, "I'll be the last lap 'o the race an' I'm way in the lead. They can't catch me." There was a grave assurance in his voice that thrilled her pride in spite of herself, but even that couldn't quite kill the fear. She made one last appeal, her soul in her haggard eyes.

"Tug," she said tremulously. "I want you to stay—straight. I don't want you to do it, even if it is safe. I'd rather starve than—"

A high thin wall interrupted her. She stopped, her face whitening. "I forgot the kid!" she muttered in a broken voice. Tug's face grew grimmer, more determined, and somehow, though he was planning to commit a crime, sweeter. The girl suddenly broke into a fierce wild weeping, and crept into his arms. "My God, what a world!" she stormed, "What a world!" Again the cry came, and slipping out of his arms, she ran to the crib, and with bitter heart, but tender voice and eyes, crooned over the rosy baby who smiled brightly up at the sight of her.

"Poor little mite," she said pityingly, "If you just knew you wouldn't smile. If you only knew!" It was obvious that the baby at least had not suffered so far. But Evelyn shuddered when she thought how soon the milk bottle would be empty. Empty without a chance of refilling.

There were unutterable deeps in the eyes Tug bent upon mother and child as he went out, vainly trying to clear the lump out of his throat. Down on the street once more, he turned and made his way to Kelly's saloon, where he sat down at a table in the corner. He ordered a beer. His credit was good for that much anyway. While it was coming he gazed morosely at nothing, his mind busy, pressing, considering, he behind his expressionless face. He was subconsciously aware of the old man in the obviously new store clothes who came in at the door, and shuffling up to the bar, smiled around with a gentle attempt at youthful geniality, but paid no attention to him until a whiney voice insisted in a tone meant to be pleasant:

"Come on boys, the drinks are on me. I ain't inherited a bunch o' kale, an' I ain't had any fer so darn long that I'm out to paint the town, an' I want ye all ta help me." Then, as no one moved, "Ye ain't goin' ta turn down an old man are ye? Come on, step up and have one." The crowd made a move, and in a moment Tug found the old man addressing him with a watery smile of invitation. He looked up irritably, annoyed that his reverie had been disturbed. Then his heart took a sudden astounding flop. In his hand the old man held an enormous roll of bills. Tug did not notice that he held them so they were concealed from the rest of the crowd. For a moment the start he gave almost betrayed the undue interest he took, then he composed himself. "Old fool!" he thought to himself, but he grinned with an assumption of good nature.

"Much obliged ta you, believe I will wet my throat," he said carelessly, and stepped to the bar. Shades of Croesus! Here was milk for the kid, food for Evelyn. Surely providence had played right into his hands! He had been thinking so hard, trying to find a way, and here was a fortune right under his hand. He wouldn't take all of it he told himself. Only just enough to tide him over until he could get something to do. The old man would never miss a little from such a well. Evelyn and the kid might as well have it as old Kelly. He turned after swallowing his drink, and apparently without looking at the strange creature, stepped out of the door. He waited at the corner, and when the old man shuffled out of the door he followed him.

Again fate seemed to play right into his hands. The old man, instead of heading up town, turned down the darkest street in the neighborhood. It was very early in the evening, but there was a fine drizzling rain falling, and the streets were nearly deserted. No one saw him slip after the stooping figure. Noiseless as a creeping panther he slid along, his hand in his pocket, clutching a gun, which was, to tell the truth, empty. "Hands up!" he suddenly commanded, stepping in front of the man, who had stopped uncertainly in front of a peculiarly dark doorway, and seemed afraid to go any further.

At the sudden command the old man seemed to shrink into himself, and his hands unclashed in front of him. "Hands UP!" ordered Tug again. The ancient figure stepped awkwardly toward him, and the hands started waveringly upward almost in his face. Then, when it was quite close, the decrepit form, suddenly and without warning, straightened itself like a steel spring and Tug thought a battering ram hit him on the end of the jaw. As he lost consciousness he had a wild vision of Billy Mitchy's thick features leering at him under a tousled mop of grey hair. He was oblivious to the men who ran from the dark doorway and grasped that gentleman's hand in congratulation. He did not know it when they slipped the handcuffs on him. He only awoke when he was being taken into the station. Mitchy and the cub on either side of him.

"Gee, Mitchy," the desk sergeant was saying, "You're sure some boy! I never believed you could pull that off. You ought to be a regular cop!" Mitchy swelled like a pouter pigeon,

and the cub was fairly dancing with excitement. He was very young and very new on the paper, and he recognized a chance to make some of the old horses admit he was some reporter. He meant to make a great story out of this. It would be a crackerjack, a scoop, and who could tell but what—his imagination trailed off into the clouds.

"This looks bad for you," the sergeant was telling Tug sociably, as he entered him. "I suppose you know we have the goods on you on the Kiernan job, too don't you?"

"Have you?" asked Tug imperturbably.

The sergeant smiled to himself. That had been a wild shot of his—and he knew there was no use trying to bluff Tug Ferguson anyway. Besides, Tug's attention was obviously engrossed with something outside of his capture. Something was worrying him badly. It was not long coming to the surface.

"Say," he wanted to know with sudden impulsiveness "Couldn't some 'o you guys kinda look out for my wife an' kid? They're starvin'." That's why I'm here tonight. I was tryin' to lift somethin' so's I could gem 'em some eats. I couldn't get no job." He stopped abruptly, looking rather wildly about at the unfriendly faces. "Its straight goods," he resumed defensively. "I don't give a d—n about myself, but Evelyn an' the kid, I—"

The sergeant smiled skeptically. He had heard that before. Mitchy laughed insultingly. Then he broke himself.

"I'll see to your wife. I had 'er before you did!" he lied with an ugly leer.

Before this the cub had begun to vaguely sense that there was something beneath the surface here. The personal enmity of Billy Mitchy had made itself apparent on more than one occasion, so he was not surprised. Neither was he shocked when Tug made a wild lunge at his tormentor. He couldn't hit him, manacled as he was, but he started him into jerking out a large pink bordered silk handkerchief he had been nonchalantly fingering. With it came a small gold locket and chain. It tumbled to the floor before he could recover it, and the nearest policeman picked it up. Mitchy's face palmed, and he made a nervous move to reclaim it. "Hello," said the officer in a startled tone. "What's this? Its got the monogram JCK on it. Ain't that the letters on the locket Mrs. Kiernan said was stole?"

"What?" said the sergeant sharply. "Let me have a look at it!" He took it, and after searching among some papers, presently called the Kiernan number. Meanwhile Mitchy had lost his head completely. He was too taken by surprise to think of a plausible lie, and his face was a study in confusion. He was fairly caught in his own trap. When he thought attention was directed away from him for an instant he made a dive for the door, but the cub was clumsily in his way, and before he could knock him down, he was seized from behind, and brought, struggling and protesting, to the desk, where the iron bracelets were slipped on his wrists.

"What's your address Mitchy?" snapped the sergeant authoritatively. He muttered an answer. "Is that correct?" the sergeant demanded of the cub. "Yes," stammered that round eyed individual.

The sergeant proceeded to write something on a piece of paper, which he shoved over the desk. "Here you," he said to the officer who stood near; "You and M'Ginnis take a run out there and look this guy's lodgings over. Here's a list of the Kiernan stuff. Get a hustle on you too, Mr. Kiernan. It'll be here before you get back if you don't."

Mitchy was dragged away, sullen, vengeful, but badly scared, and the cub stepped up to Tug.

"Say," he began awkwardly, "Was that really straight about—about the wife and kid? I'd—I'd kind of like to—to—help out if I could."

Tug looked at him, surprised. Then his face lighted up. "It sure is!" he said wistfully. "An' I'd—I'd—"

"Where can I find 'em?" interrupted the cub hastily.

"910 Quimby Street, upstairs, an'—an'—thanks!" he said simply, holding out one shackled hand.

"All right," returned the cub, grasping it. "Don't worry about them, they'll be taken care of," and he was gone.

We shall not take time to go into the details of the finding of the Kiernan loot in Mitchy's room, nor of the cub's really throbbing "heart-interest" story of the red haired girl who watched a chubby, sleeping baby with pale face and fearful eyes. Suffice to say that on the last lap of his race with the law, Tug Ferguson found himself. The cub's story awoke many kind hearts. It even brought Tug the work he had tramped the city day after day in vain for.

It was a summer evening, some months later. Tug, tired, soaked, but happy, swung open a gate in front of a cozy, tiny house, bright with flowers.

A vision of flying red curls, milk and rose cheeks, and sparkling brown eyes, met him at the door.

"Hello you, boy!" she greeted him as he kissed her.

"Hello yourself," he cried gaily, swinging his fat crowsing son to his shoulder.

"Some kid, ain't he now!" he asserted proudly.